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Fear of Flying

by Brendan O'Meara

The propellers spun, at first slow, then with blurring velocity. This I found unsettling. Not that the propellers seemed to be in working order, but I had never been on a puddle jumper before, a prop plane, or an aircraft that possesses only one purpose: that being to ferry us to a bigger plane at a bigger airport, but, unfortunately, without bigger seats for someone of my modest means.

I don't enjoy flying, which is odd because this was not inherently the case. My apprehensions with flight have only grown since I first took to the air sometime in 1996, palms get sweatier, breaths increasingly abbreviated, thoughts more gruesome. That day, in 1996, I was fine. But with increased exposure to the sounds an aircraft makes, all the prescribed sounds and the unexpected have heightened themselves into my awareness. So when television screens depress from the cabin's ceiling, my immediate thought is of life-giving oxygen bags that symbolize anything but life in the coming minutes.

When I am flying I recite many things to myself to assure that I don't de-evolve into an emotional wreck. I say, "Fool, sports teams fly every day with hardly a whisper. Businessman fly every day to Washington, D.C. and to Boston as if riding the Metro from Columbia Heights to Dupont Circle." I also watch the flight attendants with adoration as they walk the tightrope of the aisle no matter the turbulence with as calm a façade of one doing a sun salutation.

Prior to my latest venture onto an airplane, three distinct and consequential events happened. Each played its way into my psyche as reason to hail a cab to Las Vegas instead of fly there, but, as I would rationalize, the odds were clearly in everyone's, and, more importantly, my favor.

First, on January 16, 2009 US Airways Flight 1549 struck a flock of geese blowing out its engines. Capt. Chesley Burnett Sullenberger III successfully coasted his plane into the Hudson River. With the plane floating, its nose up as if gasping for air, trying to stay afloat, all 150 passengers were ushered to safety.

Second, I had sadistically read Michael Paterniti's Esquire piece "The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy." Dumb. This is the haunting recreation of a Swiss airplane that crashed off the coast of Nova Scotia and stripped 229 people of their lives.

I read this piece while in bed with the blue-glow halo of my book light illuminating the actors on stage. Upon finishing, I fell back into my pillow with the images of "de-gloved" bodies floating in the ocean.

While this piece of journalism sets a new gold standard in terms of reportage and, above all, writing, I do not recommend it for those who have a fear of flying. As my former literary journalism professor, Norman Sims, said, "It's very powerful. You're on the plane while it is going down." No, thank you.

Third, on February 13, 2009, Continental Flight 3407 accumulated too much ice on its hull, pitched and rolled out of the sky and into a house in Clarence Center, N.Y., killing 49 people

on the plane and one on the ground.

Of course it was this last flight that worried me the most. I would be flying on the same model Q400 aircraft that had so failed so many people.

We piddled around the tarmac, taking hairpin turns this way and that to find the right breeze to attack. It was very, very bumpy on the ground. The wings flapped in sporadic rhythms, like a newly hatched chick. The turbulence jiggled my excess flab, most notably in my chest. I imagined that certain women who feel in some ways lacking would kill for a set like these. This depressed me.

We came to a stop and the captain came over the speakers in a calm, though annoyed hush informing us that our flight has been delayed.

He cut the engines and all was quiet save for the few people alerting friends and family of their prolonged arrival.

There we waited for another thirty minutes, strapped into our sedan-sized seats, the propellers stale on the wings. From the surrounding seats I heard the vexed exhalations of those who just wanted to get in the air and to their connecting flights, which, at this point, they might miss. Weddings and vacations became uncertain; getting away was put on hold for more suffocating moments inside the cabin.

Within thirty minutes, the speakers crackled. The captain! The captain said he sold his soul so the could get us off the ground. Hadn't Christopher Marlowe taught him anything?

Still, one never questioned the man or woman who piloted your aircraft, even if it was only a twenty-eight minute flight — how remarkable that our flight was to be so short. There I was, making a stink over a trip that would be less than half an hour once we sped into the wind and up into the air. Such are the apprehensions of the bad flyer.

The engines powered up with their drawn-out cough of exhaust. My eyes fixed on the crown of hair peaking above the seat in front. I gripped my knees and subsequently moistened the fabric in that particular location, this always being a source of ridicule to my friends. After creating enough thrust, we tilted back and hummed into the air, and in came either the feeling of panic or calm to know that your life is no longer in your own hands. This raises the question: Are we ever in control? At least with two feet on the earth, it seems so.

Once we were in the air, I found the flight to be surprisingly steady. This plane certainly was more comfortable in the air than on the ground, but I still wanted to stay occupied and volley my attention away from the noises of whooshing air and mumbling engines. This allowed me to drift.

I wondered what went through the minds of the passengers around me; this goes for all flights, but especially this one. I wondered if they were as nervous. Or were they as carefree as friends of mine who routinely fall asleep during takeoff. Yes, fallen asleep when the engines do most of their lifting, when your chest feels like caving, when you are pressed into the back of your seat, when your stomach dips as the wheels lose contact with the earth, when you pray

to the god you ignore all other days of the year. It was fun to think about what kept my fellow passengers minds ticking and occupied.

The generously figured girl beside me in her pink cardigan eyed "The Greatest Gift" in the Sky Mall magazine.

There was the man to my right, across the aisle, the two of us separated by eighteen inches. He had a book in his lap that he gripped as if clinging to the edge of a cliff ... something about the twenty years among our hostile Indians. He declined his tray and rested that 500-page volume on it, unopened, and crossed his hands at the wrists, internalizing the flight attendant pouring water and soda to thirsty passengers. "Diet Coke," he eventually said.

Diagonally to the right, spotlighted by the glow above her, a middle-aged woman, skinny like Popeye's Olive Oyl, read "The First Patient" with a pencil in her right hand. A moment ago, the book was closed, but the pencil was tightly threaded through the gaps in her fingers. The light was off. Prior to that, she had her cell phone out while we were rooted like a statue on the tarmac. The background lit up with two little kids with candy-sweet smiles. They disappeared when she began to dial.

Bags crinkled open and the air inside the cabin swelled with the aroma of pretzels, hungry folks chewing and drying their mouths to this bar food, 15,000 feet above the nearest watering hole.

"Excuse me, sorry. Excuse me," a flight attendant said as we passed over potholes in the sky. She pushed the cart to the back of the plane and popped open another can of soda. For her? For someone else, most likely. But I did not turn around.

Eighteen minutes into the flight we began our descent, the pilot's lullaby voice reassured us of various concerns both pressing and urgent.

And as I wondered what went on in the minds of those so close to me, I could not help but wonder if they, in some way, were inwardly expressing their own form of curiosity. Maybe someone looked at me, calmed maybe, and wondered that as this Q400 Express Jet swayed in the air, that I kept writing, that I must have been so comfortable, so at ease.

I'd hate to break it to them.

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